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ABSTRACT

Research on the transition to parenthood suggests that the extent of the changes mothers and fathers undergo depends to a degree on the expectations which they develop during pregnancy. This study focused on expectations held by parents-to-be at the outset of the pregnancy regarding the potential effects that the baby's arrival would have on various aspects of their lives. One year later, data were obtained about the real changes experienced by the parents. Participating in the study were 95 families studied longitudinally from the beginning of the mother's pregnancy until their children were 10 to 12 months old. Subjects differed in parity, educational level, and maternal employment status. Fathers and mothers were interviewed separately regarding their social network and social support, marital relationship, division of domestic labor, expected father involvement in childrearing, and resources for facing parenthood. At a follow-up visit to their homes, parents were interviewed regarding the same issues, and they also noted their level of satisfaction with parenthood. Findings indicated that the actual impact of the arrival of a baby was anticipated only in a very general, nonspecific way and that the expectations held during pregnancy corresponded poorly with the actual situation parents experienced a year and a half later. (KB)

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THE IMPACT ON PARENTS OF THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW BABY: THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND THE CHANGES WHICH THEY GO THROUGH[1]

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ABSTRACT

There are few other things in adult life more significant than the birth of a baby. Research about the transition to parenthood suggests that the extent of the changes which mothers and fathers undergo depends, to a degree, on the expectations which they develop during the pregnancy.

The data presented here comes from a longitudinal study into the transition to parenthood of 95 families. Among other things, we studied at the outset of the pregnancy the expectations held by the parent-to-be regarding the potential effects which the arrival of the baby would have on various aspects of their lives. A year later, we obtained data about the real changes experienced by parents related to the topict above referred.

Our results show that the actual impact of the arrival of a baby is only really anticipated in a very general, non-specific way. Indeed, taking into account the more detailed implications of parenthood (such as potential changes to the relationship between the couple, responsability for domestic chores, relationships with the extended family, friends, etc.), those expectations held during the pregnancy period correspond poorly with the actual situation obtained a year-and-a-half later.

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AIMS

✓ To evaluate parents' expectations about the influence of a new baby in their lives during pregnancy.
✓ To determine the extent of the actual baby's impact on parents' lives.
✓ To examine the relation between the two topics above referred.

METHOD

Subjects: A group of families (N=95) were studied longitudinally from the beginning of the mother's pregnancy (T1) until the time in which their children were 10-12 months old (T2). The subjects differed according to several sociodemographic variables: previous experience as parents (primiparous and non-primiparous), level of education (high, medium, and low), and mothers' labour status (single- and dual-earner families).

Instruments and procedure:

T1 → Fathers and mothers were interviewed separately using the *Interview at the Women's Pregnancy* (IWP). This instrument was designed to explore several contents related to the process of becoming parent: social network and social support, marital relationship, division of domestic labor, expected father's involvement on childrearing, resource sources for facing parenthood, etc.

T2 → Families were visited at their homes, and we interviewed parents again, using the *Interview at the First Year* (IFY), with similar characteristics to the IWP and adding contents, like the level of satisfaction with parenthood or self- and partner-evaluation as parent.

In IWP we obtained data of the parents' expectations about the changes in several domains related to the arrival of a new baby:

- General changes in their lives.
- Specific changes, related to:
  - · Relationships with the extended family.
  - · Relationships with friends.
  - · Self-concept.
  - · Division of domestic chores.
  - · Marital relationship.

In IFY we explored the actual changes that had taken place.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to determine the grade of correspondence between the expected and the actual changes in each domain, we performed Chi-Square analysis between the data of T1 and T2. Results show that there was a significant correspondence between the expectations and the actual changes after the baby's birth only in a non-specific level (see table 1). So, parents that anticipated during pregnancy a global change in their lives experieced, indeed, this kind of modifications a year and a half later. In the same way, parents that expected changes in specific domains (habits, or time for themselves, or priorities, etc.) underwent those changes. Finally, parents that had not anticipated changes did not face them in their new situation. However, if we take into account the expectations obtained in T1 and the changes in T2 in specific domains (see tables 2-6), no significative relations were found.

p=.000		T2		
		A GLOBAL CHANGE (56'84%)	SPECIFIC CHANGE/S (36'84%)	NO CHANGE (6'31%)
T1	A GLOBAL CHANGE (57'82%)	**37'8%**	15'6%	1'1%
	SPECIFIC CHANGE/S (23'12%)	8'9%	**16'7%**	0%
	NO CHANGE (19'04%)	8'9%	5'6%	**5'6%**

TABLE 1. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL CHANGES IN THEIR LIFE (MARKED SIGNIFICANTLY FULL CELLS)

p=.200		T2		
		QUANTITATIVE CHANGE (42'1%)	QUALITATIVE CHANGE (14'73%)	NO CHANGE (43'15%)
T1	QUANTITATIVE CHANGE (16'43%)	13'3%	3'3%	3'3%
	QUALITATIVE CHANGE (8'9%)	1'1%	1'1%	4'4%
	NO CHANGE (74'65%)	27'8%	10%	35'6%

TABLE 2. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL CHANGES IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS

p=.200		T2		
		CLOSER RELATIONSHIP (30'52%)	MORE INDEPENDENCE (16'84%)	NO CHANGE (52'63%)
T1	CLOSER RELATIONSHIP (30'55%)	11'1%	5'6%	13'3%
	MORE INDEPENDENCE (6'94%)	2'2%	2'2%	1'1%
	NO CHANGE (62'5%)	16'7%	7'8%	40%

TABLE 3. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL CHANGES IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

p=.805		T2		
		INCREASED FATHER INVOLVEMENT (26'59%)	INCREASED MOTHER INVOLVEMENT (8'51%)	NO CHANGE (64'89%)
T1	INCREASED F-INVOLVEMENT (62'68%)	16'7%	4'8%	30'1%
	NO CHANGE (37'31%)	9'5%	2'4%	28'6%

TABLE 4. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL CHANGES IN HOUSEHOLD CHORES

p=.222		T2		
		IMPROVED (36'17%)	DETERIORATED (29'78%)	NO CHANGE (34'%)
T1	IMPROVED (28'88%)	13'5%	7'9%	5'6%
	DETERIORATED (12'59%)	2'2%	6'7%	2'2%
	NO CHANGE (58'51%)	19'1%	15'7%	26'9%

TABLE 5. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL CHANGES IN MARITAL RELATIONSHIP

p=.157		T2	
		YES (43'15%)	NO (56'84%)
T1	YES (29'19%)	8'9%	21'1%
	NO (70'8%)	35'5%	34'4%

TABLE 6. EXPECTED AND ACTUAL CHANGES IN SELF-CONCEPT

CONCLUSIONS

Our results and analysis show that there is a reasonable relationship between the expectations about the influence of a new baby and the real impact of the baby's birth on parent's life. So, fathers and mothers apparently are reasonably aware and prepared to face up the general and global demands as new parents. Nevertheless, in specific domains, these expectations had to change radically; regardless of the specific content of the expectations during pregnancy, it sems that, in order to face this relevant developmental transition, the parent's previous preparation does not adjust to the actual needs when the baby is born.

Studies on transition to parenthood show that this is one of the more significant and relevant proccesses that take place during adulthood. These studies also reflect that this transition is, in general, potentially stressful due to the different and numerous demands that are created during this process. In this respect, our results show that one of the causes of this process does not relate to the type and amount of needs and changes once the baby is born, but also to the fact that the baby's effect would not be adequately anticipated for specific issues.